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ABSTRACT

For secondary English teachers concerned with the theoretical and practical problems of the traditional approaches to teaching grammar, this paper proposes that a realistic solution can be found in current linguistic investigation. This solution lies not in the product of linguistic inquiry, but in the process of inquiry itself. The paper first summarizes three basic linguistic insights as background for a method of linguistic inquiry that has proved effective in showing the complex and systematic nature of language, yet does not require any prior knowledge of either grammatical theory or of the principles of the method itself. The major portion of the paper illustrates this method with a question-and-answer sequence on the use of the tag question in English. (CC)

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LINGUISTIC INQUIRY IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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It almost seems that I should begin with an apology for bringing up once again, a delicate, almost emabrrassing issue in the field of English education - that being the problem of what, if any, grammar should be taught in secondary English classrooms. As English teachers we are painfully aware of the importance of language to our students. We feel instinctively that we should be teaching, somehow, its form. Yet there are serious problems inherent in each of our alternatives. Linguists have been telling us for decades now that traditional grammar is of little use in describing the structure of English, based as it is on a grammar for Latin, which is a highly inflected language, while the vast majority of grammatical distinctions in English are determined by word order. Traditional grammar does provide an adequate vocabulary for talking about the rules for standard English, since that is its purpose. Yet educational researchers (not to mention our own experience) tell us that a study of the rules of traditional grammar has no positive result in terms of the aim, to produce students who speak and write in standard English. It is true that an occasional student, usually through the inspiration of a superior teacher, does internalize all these rules to the extent that he can juggle the finest of grammatical distinctions. However, these students

are nearly always standard English speakers to start with, so what is really happening is that the superior teacher is merely adding another purist to the population. The students about whom we are most concerned, those whose native dialect is in some way non-standard, do not learn the rules, or if they do learn them they do not carry over into speech and writing.

The field of linguistic investigation has, over the years, offered some insights and partial solutions. Structural linguistics, which has never been extensively taught in public schools, did shift the emphasis of classroom instruction from the naming of parts toward the naming of functions, an approach which is more valid for English. Structural linguistics however, outlived its usefullness as a research strategy for linguists, and was supplanted by transformational generative grammar of the Chomsky variety before it ever had a chance to be seriously considered as a possible pedagogical replacement for traditional grammar.

The transformational model represented a phenomenal breakthrough in th field of linguistic theory. At last it seemed that an adequate grammar for English was in the offing. Some of the more progressive school systems began adopting linguistically based text series. Roberts' English Series for instance, has been widely used, often meeting with panic

on the part of teachers who felt inadequately prepared to teach the "new grammar," and with enthusiasm on the part of students, ecstatic to be released from the old dry grammar of rules for how it should be. After a time it became apparent that we were again merely juggling complex rules and terminology; learning to draw tree diagrams for sentences became an end in itself and no one, including teachers, was getting any real insight into how our language works. To make matters worse the"new grammar" did not even claim a connection with the problem of standard English.

As both a linguist and an English educator, I find myself constantly concerned with this problem. It is my opinion that current linguistics does offer us a realistic solution, though not in the form of another new grammar which will perfectly suit our pedagogical purposes. The solution lies not in the product of linguistic investigation, but rather in the process itself. I should like to propose that the answer lies in our adopting for pedagogical purposes, the method of linguistic inquiry, which is very simple actually, and requires of the student only the knowledge of English which he already possesses by virtue of being a native speaker. Transformational grammarians have observed a few basic facts about English, and languages in general, which may be of use to us here, facts so obvious that they are taken for granted by native speakers to the extent that they rarely reach conscious awareness of those who have not studied current linguistics.

Basic Linguistic Insights

Linguists observe, first of all, that all language is highly complex and highly systematic, non-standard varieties no less than standard English. Stated another way, language itself, by its very nature, is rule governed behavior - rule governed not in the sense of an arbitrary set of rules for prescribing shoulds, but rather in the sense that any system, by definition, involves rules which must be discovered if we wish to understand the system. Non-standard dialects are equally rule governed and viewed from this linguistic perspective the similarities in various dialectical language systems are far more remarkable than their deviations from standard English.

A second relevant observation about the nature of language is that the number of possible sentences in a given language, along with the number of possible semantic messages those sentences can convey, is infinite. Not only that, but any native speaker is capable of, and in fact does as a matter of course, produce and understand totally new sentences, sentences he has never before heard or read, which may indeed never before have been uttered or thought in exactly that form in the whole history of the language. It was this observation about language that has resulted in the demise of structural linguistics as a viable research strategy for linguists, and is the basis of the famous Skinner-Chomsky debate about how language learning takes place. Chomsky concluded in the mid-

fifties that one could listen to sentences in a language his whole lifetime and never hear them all, and thus that Skinner's stimulus-response theory is inadequate to account for the ability of even small children to produce totally novel sentences. A classic example is the child of six who said to his father at bedtime, "What did you bring that book I didn't want to be read to out of up for?" Purists may cringe at the awkwardness of stringing together so many adverbs, but surely we must all grant that it is highly unlikely that the child had ever heard such a sentence in his life. And further, that the construction itself communicates the child's meaning precisely, effectively and in a form that is clearly recognizable as English. Anyone with a reverence for the beauty of the complexity of language as a system must surely stand in awe of the ability of one so young to manipulate such a system of complex rules so delightfully and easily. Note that it is impossible to move even one word to another position and still retain semantic and structural grammaticality.

* Did what you bring that book I didn't want to be read to...
* What did you bring that book I didn't want to be read to out of for up?
* What did you bring that book that didn't I want to be ...

The mystery can only be increased by noting a third important observation about the nature of language. Every human being, barring severe mental or physical abnormality, learns

effortlessly and perfectly the rules of the language he grows up hearing. Furthermore he does so for the most part before he has reached school age. Each normal human child has internalized virtually all the rules on which his native language operates by the time he is eight or nine years old. This is not to say that there are no variation in vocabulary, in the ability to articulate and to manipulate abstract concepts. These factor, of course, are subject to variables such as intelligence, environment and personality structure. But, every child learns the system, internalizes the rules, the finite aspect of language, to a degree that defies the descriptive powers of even the most brilliant linguist. The native speaker never produces sentences that are ungrammatical in the sense that the following is ungrammatical.

* Brother my like anyway you not.

Yet from the moment a child enters school his teachers have traditionally, and with the most admirable of motives, zeroed in on changing his

My brother don't like you noway.

to the more socially acceptable

My brother doesn't like you anyway.

Is it any wonder that we have produced generations of people who are to some degree insecure about the form of their language? Is it any wonder that our students are afraid to write? That we as English teachers so often get a defensive reaction on being introduced to new people? I never fail to feel a secret twinge of shame when someone says to me "Oh, I'll have to be careful how I talk."

There is a sane, humane way to handle language study in the classroom. It involves investigation and discovery processes and does not require knowledge of any grammatical theory. A minimum vocabulary for talking about language is useful, but even that is not necessary to begin. The teacher can supply such terms as subject, verb or article as they are called for by questions on the faces of students as they try to articulate their observations. In this way students will learn the terms because they need them to express themselves, the normal way of acquiring vocabulary in language learning. By adopting not the content, but the form of linguistic inquiry for pedagogical purposes we may begin with students to unravel the mysteries of the structure of language, or at the very least, to foster appreciation for this amazing ability that we all have as human beings.

Method of Linguistic Inquiry

The method of linguistic investigation is extremely simple. It has no content but is a matter of learning, by doing of course, how to think about language in an objective and exploratory way. The linguist

1) observes linguistic data
2) forms tentative generalizations

3) tests the generalization against a larger body of linguistic data

4) either accepts the generalization as true for the language in question, or revises it to cover the exceptions found in the new data, or, it this revised generalization proves to be too unwieldy, scraps it and starts anew.

By way of illustration I would like to treat briefly one aspect of English which focuses on the structure (syntax) of the language. I have used this phenomenon in English as an opening exercise in language classes of varying ages and abilities, none of whom could be said to have been knowledgeable of any system of formal grammar. The exercise has proved effective in accomplishing at least two important objectives; it successfully illustrates the complex and systematic nature of language as well as the enormity of the intuitive knowledge which every native speaker possesses, and it provides a concrete format for utilizing the linguistic inquiry method without requiring any prior knowledge of either grammatical theory or of the principles of the method itself. This discussion is not intended to exhaust either linguistic or pedagogical possibilities. Space permits only a brief illustration of the method.

The Structure of English: The tag-question

English, as well as some other languages, French for instance, includes a means by which a speaker may turn any declarative sentence into a question of the sort that requests either confirmation or negation of the addressee. In French this form is very simple, consisting uniformly of the construction n'est pas. In English the formation of the tag, in the tag-question, is far more complicated. It may be illustrated by the following sentences:

S1 You are going to the opera, aren't you?
S2 Old Ponsonby is married, isn't he?
S3 That couldn't be Richard, could it?
S4 Life is a real hoot, isn't it?
S5 Margaret flew to Europe to experience another aspect of life, didn't she?
S6 You'll never understand me, will you?
S7 Bank presidents are girl watchers, aren't they?
S8 He ran for dog catcher, did'nt he?

After briefly explaining, by way of illustration, what the tag-question is in English, I ask students to prepare about ten examples each to provide the data from which to begin working. Students have no difficulty understanding what to do. A tag may be applied to any declarative sentence and all native speakers are easily able to supply the correct tag. The next step is to fill the chalkboard with student created tag-questions attempting to include as many kinds as possible. S1 - S8 above provides sufficient data to yield all of the basic rules. I usually begin by calling students attention to the number of different form the tags included and showing them that each tag is exactly as it must be and may not be changed.

No native speaker, for instance, would ever say

*That couldn't be Richard, won't he?

The asterisk before the sentence is the conventional way that linguists mark a sentence as unacceptable or ungrammatical. The ability to make such a judgement regarding the acceptability or well-formedness of sentences is considered to be a part of the native speaker's intuitive competence.

The next step is to talk to students about "the object of the game" which is to discover what the native speaker must know in order to be able to supply the correct tag. Students have already proved to themselves that they can, in fact, do this. With advanced classes, I have used an analogy with a computer. How would one need to program a computer in order that it could supply the correct tag for any declarative English sentence? Actually no computer exists which could be programmed to handle even this small aspect of human language facility, as just for a start the computer would have to be told the gender of every possible common or proper noun in English, an impossible task considering the infinite nature of language. Once students understand the nature of the problem to be solved they are able to begin making observations, using the data they have provided. Within a class period, students can make most of the relevant observations about the construction of the tag. The most difficult problem is ~~the~~ to get word the generalizations properly and I help with this in the early stages of study. We list the generalizations on the board. A complete list would include:

1. If the subject of the sentence is a personal pronoun, that pronoun is copied in the tag.

2. If the subject of the sentence is a noun it must be discovered whether that noun is considered to be male, female or neither. If male the tag will contain he, if female, she, if neither, it.

3. If the noun which is the subject of the sentence is plural, the tag will contain they, regardless of the gender of that noun.

4. If the sentence contains a so-called helping verb, that verb is copied in the tag. The form of the helping verb varies according to whether the subject is singular or plural and whether it is first, second or third person.

5. If the sentence does not contain a helping verb, the tag will contain an appropriate form of do.

6. If the sentence contains a not the tag will not contain one; if the sentence does not contain a not the tag will contain one.

7. When the tag includes a not it will generally but not necessarily appear in contracted form (n't).

8. Each element in the tag must follow a certain order. The helping verb comes first, and includes the contracted not when there is one, and is followed by the appropriate form of a personal pronoun.

I am not suggesting that the above generalizations could be properly deduced immediately by students, or that they must necessarily appear in this form. The length of time involved as well as the sophistocation of the form of the rules is dependent on many variables; the age and ability of students, the degree of familiarity with grammatical terminology, the familiarity with the processes of linguistic investigation. I do submit however, that all native speakers do possess the knowledge and ability required to make the observations themselves, though not necessarily the skill to formally verbalize the generalization. This specific ability must be developed with practice.

The teacher, of course, must guide the students toward the correct solution of the problem by means of the questions she asks the class, but this does not involve the kind of questioning which forces the student to second-guess the answer the teacher is looking for. A brief example of a possible question and answer sequence should illustrate the difference. Preceeding the following sequence students have arrived at the generalization that the personal pronoun which appears in the tag is the same one that appears as the subject of the sentence, a correct observation, but incomplete in that it does not cover situations in which the subject of the sentence is not a personal pronoun.

Teacher: You've said that the tag includes a pronoun that is the same as the one in the sentence. What if the sentence doesn't have a pronoun?

Student A: It has to!

Teacher: Does it? (silence) Look at the sentences on the board and see if they all have pronouns.

Student B: S2 doesn't have one.

Student C: S5 doesn't either.

Teacher: Are there any others? Student A?

Student A: (after a pause) Bank presidents are girl watchers.

Teacher: Right. Do these sentences still have personal pronouns in the tags?

Several students: Yes

Teacher: O.K. Then the next problem is to figure out how the native speaker knows which personal pronoun to use. Or maybe it doesn't matter. Look at S2. Old Ponsonby is married, isn't he? Would any of you say, Old Ponsonby is married, isn't it?

Students: (laughter, and several answer no)

Teacher: What about Old Ponsonby is married, isn't they?

Students: (more laughter, several answer no)

Teacher: So it does matter which pronoun you use. How do you know which one? (this answer may be awhile coming - just wait)

Student X: You have to know whether Old Ponsonby is a he, she or it.

Teacher: Ahh! And what does that have to do with it?

Student X: Well you wouldn't say Old Ponsonby is married, isn't she? (some students giggle)

Student Y: You could too!

Student X: You could not!

Teacher: Wait a minute. Let's see. Student Y, why do you say that it could be isn't she?

Student Y: Well because Old Ponsonby might be an old lady. (Several students respond "Oh, yeah" and several "That's dumb)

Teacher: But if Old Ponsonby is a she then the tag must have she, is that what you're saying?

Student Y: Yes, and if its not he or she it has to be it.

Teacher: Good. It looks like we're getting somewhere. Let's write it on the board and then we can test it and see if it's always true. (Writes - The speaker must determine whether the subject of the sentence is male, female or neither. If male, the tag will contain he, if female, she and if neither, it.) Is that a satisfactory way of putting it? (Students nod.) Good. Now look at the sentences on the board and see whether they all follow this rule.

Student A: S7 doesn't.

Student A is about to observe that in some cases the tag contains they which serves as a counterexample to the generalization the class has just made, leading to the further observation of the effect that plurality in the subject has on the tag formation.

The above question and answer sequence, though only a fragment of classroom experience, should be sufficient to illustrate the linguistic inquiry methed in operation. Note that it is unnecessary for students to know the steps in the method, and that they are not employed in any kind of formal, step by step manner, but rather the steps are a natural result of looking at language samples with the purpose of discovery. Within this short sequence students have made observations, from which they formed a tentative generalization. Student A has noticed a counterexample which will call for a re- examination of the existing data, and in this case a revision of the generalization to cover the cases involving plural subjects. When the revised generalization has been formulated it will then be tested again against a larger body of data and in this case, the generalization should stand.

In conclusion, I should like to anticipate the objection which will tempt many of you to dismiss my proposal as a practical possibility for your classroom. "That's all very well, but I have not studied current linguistics and don't even know where to begin." My answer is that it is not necessary to have studied current linguistics. You are native speakers of English. Start with just this example, which is discussed only partially here. Get together with a group of your colleagues, in a in-service workshop or something, and play with the language.

Using this method, explore exhaustively the formation of the tag-question in English and see where it leads you. You might, for instance, decide to look at how the tag operates in imperative sentences, or to investigate the general subject of negativity in English. Can a negative (not etc.) be placed just anywhere in a sentence? If not, where can it go? etc. You'll be amazed, not only at what you'll discover about language, but at how much fun you'll have. If you get stuck, I'd be happy to offer suggested directions. Let me know how it turns out!